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# Men in Crisis: Pornographic Images in Quim Monzó's Fiction.

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The presence of sexuality and pornographic imagery has been highlighted as a salient feature of Catalan writer Quim Monzó's literary texts (Cònsul 1995: 184; Illas 2012: 173; Marrugat 2014: 89). Already in 1979, for example, Dolors Oller identified “una pura i estupenda descripció pornogràfica” (1979: 94) in the short story ‘Història d’un amor’, included in *Uf, va dir ell* (1978). Similarly, Enric Balaguer described some of the images in ‘Pigmalió’ (*El perquè de tot plegat*, 1993) as examples of ‘pornoviolència’ (1997: 88). In spite of this, pornographic imagery in Monzó's fiction remains largely unexamined. In this article, I will analyse this particular aspect of Monzó's fiction through a focus on three scarcely studied facets of his narrative: first, how gender considerations in general and notions of masculinity in particular play an essential role in understanding his fiction, with a particular focus on power relations; secondly, how the study of pornography provides us with a prism through which to examine the tensions between high and mass forms of culture in Monzó's narrative; and, thirdly, how the conflict between aesthetics and politics manifests itself both in his writings and in his publicly expressed opinions concerning pornography.

My main aim is to demonstrate that the hardly deniable influence of pornography on Monzó's fiction is intimately related to one of its central tensions, namely, the representation of Western hegemonic masculinity in crisis. Drawing on Gramsci's theories of hegemony in class relations, R.W. Connell formalized the concept of hegemonic masculinity to refer to ‘the configuration of gender practice [...] which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the

subordination of women' (Connell 2005: 77). Her objective was to analyse the dominant model of heterosexual masculinity, seen as authoritarian and built in opposition to women, as well as to other forms of manhood subordinate to the hegemonic archetype. In agreement with Connell, Harry Christian stated that the dominant model of masculinity is mainly based on the following assumptions: first, that men are innately superior to women; secondly, that men are by nature competitive, tough, unemotional and prone to use violence if necessary; and finally, that men conceive sex not only as pleasure but also as a way to show and exert power (Christian 1994: 9–10). Although the notion of hegemonic masculinity has already been challenged (Connell 2005: xviii), the term remains useful for an understanding of the sense of inadequacy that characterizes Monzó's male characters, who repeatedly fail to meet the demands of hegemonic masculinity. As the examined texts will reveal, pornography can function as an adequate ground on which to expose the weaknesses, challenges and power inequalities underlying hegemonic models of masculinity.

Since 'the introduction of affordable photographic printing in the mid-19th century' (Slayden 2010: 55), the pornographic genre has kept growing constantly. With the advent of commercial films in the 1970s, pornography could reach a much broader audience throughout the Western world, gradually but steadily becoming a product of mass culture. During the first decades of the twenty-first century, with the consolidation of an internet-led information economy, pornography has undeniably gained even more ground, and thanks to the all-round openness and availability provided by the Internet it 'is more accessible and mainstream than ever' (Attwood 2010: 2).

In parallel with this process of normalization, during the last forty years different and opposed viewpoints on pornography have emerged. Initially, leftist and feminist circles welcomed it on the grounds that it promoted sexual liberation, since women's

sexual desire was acknowledged and represented for the first time in mainstream cultural products, ‘in the 1970s feminists did not seek legal restrictions on pornography, or treat pornography as uniquely symbolic male dominance’ (Clover 1993: 7). Feminist reactions to early pornographic products that reproduced patriarchal conceptions of sexuality did not bring about immediate campaigning for their prohibition, but were rather bent on denouncing their misogyny while at the same time promoting alternative non-sexist representations (Wilson 2001: 39–40). In Spain, pornography was officially banned during Franco’s dictatorship, when its mere possession was considered an offence. This explains why in the 1970s, when pornography started to circulate, some young aspiring writers were quick to explore its transgressive potential. As Monzó himself has stated: ‘En pleno franquismo la pornografía era subversiva’ (González 2012).

During the 1980s, however, feminist opposition to pornography diversified into new positions, on the grounds that the genre seemed to be premised on pervasive representations of violence and abuse towards women. In this renewed critical context, activists in Great Britain and the US lobbied for laws to censor violent pornography and ban soft-porn magazines from newsagents (Rodgers and Wilson 1991: 9–15; Norden 1990: 1–4). Nevertheless, differently positioned feminist activists rejected this line of action by highlighting pornography’s role in the path towards the normalization of sex and of women’s sexuality, while also deploring the presence of sexual violence against women in a significant percentage of pornographic products. Feminist debates on pornography were often cut across by other political and religious susceptibilities, with pro-censorship groups usually being criticized for their connivance with fundamentalist Christian and conservative groups (Clover 1993: 8; Wilson 2001: 41). These bitter disputes, known as the pornography wars (Wilson 2001: 38–40), contributed deeply to

politicizing the field of pornography (Kimmel 2005: 75–83). In spite of these debates, however, pornographies –the term used by Williams to show the diversity and variety of this genre against the reductionism of pro-censorship feminists– ‘have become fully recognizable fixtures of popular culture’ (Williams 2004: 1).

Monzó’s narrative production is imbued with the tensions and concerns of the above debates. An overview of his fiction through the prism of pornography reveals, first and foremost, that the recurrence of these images is too noticeable to be ignored from a critical perspective. Secondly, where pornographic images appear, they often depict a pornographic utopia, or to use Steven Marcus’ influential term, a pornotopia (Marcus 1970). In other words, these images are used to create the idea of a fully sexualized world where men are always satisfied because women conform to, participate in and enjoy playing a part in men’s sexual fantasies. Finally, Monzó’s recourse to pornographic images does not avoid the depiction of male sexual violence against women, although typically these passages are used to point to a juncture of crisis in the characters’ masculinity, occurring when they experience forms of loss of control in the face of women’s agency. To illustrate this, I shall analyse Monzó’s second novel *Benzina* (1983), and four of his short stories, namely: ‘El regne vegetal’ (*Olivetti, Moulinex, Chaffoteaux et Maury*, 1980), ‘Pigmalió’ (*El perquè de tot plegat*, 1993), ‘La mamà’ and ‘Dos rams de roses’ (*El millor dels mons*, 2001).

Scholars Josep-Anton Fernández and Montserrat Lunati have already analysed how the crisis of masculinities is represented in Monzó’s fiction. Fernández’s analysis of *Benzina* and *La magnitud de la tragèdia* (Fernández 1998), for example, highlights that ‘Erectility problems and sexual performance are issues that both novels share’ (268). In her reading of the short story ‘Pigmalió’, Lunati argues that the female character’s enjoyment of sex both emancipates her and precipitates the downfall of the

male protagonist, who reveals himself unable to adapt to her progression from passive recipient to active sexual agent (Lunati 1999). However, neither Fernández nor Lunati's analyses address the role played by pornographic imagery in Monzó's treatment of dominant masculinity in crisis, which is one of the aims of the present article.

Set in New York in the early 1980s, the plot of *Benzina* is divided into two time periods: January and December. The first section describes the downfall of Heribert, a Catalan painter who seems to have lost his inspiration after having achieved world renown. The second part depicts the rise of Humbert, another Catalan painter who comes to substitute Heribert as a world-leading figure in contemporary art. Heribert's actions and reflections will allow us to analyse how the presence of pornographic images raises issues concerning masculinity and the debates about the role of mass culture in contemporary artistic production.

Having lost his creative motivation, Heribert, whose wife is having an affair with Humbert, wanders aimlessly around New York and ends up in a sex shop, where he enters a cabin and watches a film scene featuring group sex between two women and a man. Although in the novel Heribert describes a recognisable pornographic scene, he does so in a seemingly detached manner and with a lack of any arousal, as the following example illustrates:

El noi penetrava una de les noies mentre l'altra passava de besar la noia penetrada a besar el noi, i a besar els genitals de tots dos. [...] Ara, la càmera s'ocupava, en primer pla, de les activitats de la rossa, fins que el noi descarregà sobre el nas, els ulls i els llavis d'aquesta, que somreia feliç. També somreien feliços el noi i la noia castanya. (Monzó 1983: 51–2)

The scene ends but Heribert stays in the cabin to watch the beginning, which he had missed on entering the cabin. Now ‘apareixien les mateixes noies, però assegudes, vestides i totes fineses, bevent en gots llargs’ (Monzó 1983: 52). This image stands in contrast with the previous description, where the girls were only wearing high heels and stockings. The reader and consumer of pornography is meant to recognize in this scene the typical theme of the two bored girls waiting for their pizza delivery, who swiftly persuade the pizza boy to stay with them. In an interview, Monzó has remarked the comic potential of this prototypical sequence of pornographic films: ‘Hay momentos buenísimos. Hablando de lugares comunes... A mí el rollo del pizzero me descojona’ (González 2012). But beyond the comedy of reproducing in the literary text –and without a shadow of irony or allegory– an archetypical pornographic scene, this passage in *Benzina* engages with one of the constitutive characteristics of pornography as a genre, namely that it seeks to perform the promise of cyclically represented sexual pleasure, which can be related to Fredric Jameson’s idea of postmodern culture’s ‘perpetual present’ (Jameson 2001: 36). As Marcus has aptly put it: ‘A typical piece of pornographic fiction [...] goes on and on and ends nowhere’ (Marcus 1970: 279).

Threesome scenes consisting of two women and one man are part of the stock inventory of pornographic genres (Maina 2009: 131), a fact that lends itself to considerations from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity and its association with the value of male sexual potency –insofar as a *real* male cannot reject intercourse with two attractive young women. Readiness to have sex is one of the key factors of dominant manhood: as Victor Seidler puts it, ‘Sex is the way we prove our masculinity’ (Seidler 1989: 23). Constant sexual availability is therefore central to traditional masculine values, this being the reason why it would be absurd within the pornographic frame for the pizza boy to choose to continue with his work shift over the possibility of

having a sexual experience. This narrative of endless sexual accessibility tends to involve the separation of sex and emotions, which according to Michael Kimmel is one of the markers of hegemonic masculinity, as is also the high status attached to non-relational sex (Kimmel 2005: 15). The pornographic genre is one of the best examples of this, because sexual encounters are nearly always casual and involve non-emotionally attached agents.

While the pizza delivery man in the pornographic scene throws himself eagerly into the experience of having unexpected sex with two strangers, Monzó's character Heribert does not show the slightest interest –let alone arousal– while watching the film. According to Fernàndez, *Benzina* depicts 'a male subject in crisis who has lost control [...] of his expressive attributes' (Fernàndez 1998: 263), further linking this trait to Heribert's problematic relationships with women (267). Heribert's attitude when watching the film certainly reinforces this point: at several moments he seems more focused on describing the sex shop cabin than the activities on the screen. When he realizes that the cabin is equipped to facilitate masturbation, he starts frantically to look everywhere for stains, until he realizes that in doing so he is missing the film. Later on, after leaving the sex shop, he wonders 'perquè no havia experimentat cap erecció en tota l'estona, ni fullejant les revistes ni a la cabina' (Monzó 1983: 53). Heribert's lack of enthusiasm denotes the failure of his sexual drive, which calls into question his manhood. This might explain his rather odd behaviour afterwards, when he buys a women's magazine, walks into a bar's toilet, and starts masturbating while looking at the photos of female models, only to get bored soon afterwards and see his erection disappear. This can be read as a desperate attempt to reassert his normative masculinity, although he fails once again. Heribert's dysfunctionality is amplified by the fact that he is not aroused by a mainstream heterosexual pornographic representation, but by a



women's magazine, with their characteristic focus on articles on make-up and weight-loss techniques. Through this description of women's magazines as fulfilling a pornographic function, the narrative is not only exposing the former as a product that is determined by the male gaze, but also pointing to the subjective element in any attempt to define what constitutes pornographic material. As a matter of fact, Rick Poynor's study of pornotopic representations in contemporary visual culture asserts that most women's magazines, in constantly talking about and representing women's bodies, are part of contemporary pornotopias (2006: 31–8). Heribert's use of such magazine as masturbatory material could be said to exemplify Poynor's point and reinforces Heribert's dysfunctionality, inasmuch as he is not aroused in two archetypically pornotopic situations: the sex shop cabin and when masturbating to a women's magazine.

The presence of pornography in Monzó's narratives from the 1980s onwards can be read as part of the wider debate on popular and high culture in the Catalan context. In the 1970s, Monzó and other up-and-coming writers considered Catalan literature to be elitist and slow to adapt to changing social and cultural conditions. One of their main targets of criticism was the traditional division between high and mass culture, which they rejected (Crameri 2008: 75). Considerations about the division between high and mass forms of culture have also pervaded the debate on pornography (Clover 1993: 3), with most analyses focusing on just what differentiates pornography from erotica precisely in these terms, with pornography usually falling into the less respected (i.e. non-artistic) category. According to Linda Nead, in modern cultural discourses a number of dichotomies have pushed pornography to a place outside the artistic milieu, typically through the instatement of cultural divisions between pornography and art, or between the aesthetic and the obscene (Nead 1993: 145). However, Bill Thompson has

commented on how clean-cut divisions have gradually given way to more blurred categories, whereby ‘in less than thirty years pornography has lost the pejorative inference given to it by the British literary establishment in an attempt to distance their “erotica” from the more popular fare’ (Thompson 1994: 1–2). Considering the strong link between Catalan literature and high cultural production (Crameri 2008: 73–5; Fernández 2008: 138, 173), Monzó’s insertion of pornography already in early narrative texts such as *Benzina* can be interpreted as a challenge to both the Catalan literary establishment and Western literary norms, which goes hand in hand with his well-known provocative public stance. Therefore, pornographic imagery in Monzó’s fiction can be read as part of a strategy to insert popular themes in Catalan literary works and thus make them attractive for a wider public.

It is interesting to notice how *Benzina* not only illustrates the rising importance of pornography, but also reflects on the arbitrariness of certain binary oppositions. Wandering around New York, Heribert enters a bookshop and expresses his irritation about the way books have been arranged, and this leads him to wonder whether these categorizations are logical or illogical, needed or unnecessary:

No havia entès mai per quins set sous hom decidia quina era la ratlla divisòria d’aquests els llibres *per a nens*, d’aquells els llibres *per a adults*, d’aquells altres els *llibres eròtics*, d’aquells altres encara de més enllà els llibres *porno*, i d’aquells altres encara més enllà *novel·les d’amor*. (Monzó 1983: 30)

Heribert finds it difficult to understand the divisions between children’s and adult literature, erotica, pornography and romantic novels, and therefore, he problematizes the hierarchy of genres. His vision illustrates three main points concerning some of the main tenets of cultural modernity: first, it shows the constructedness of genre

differentiations by ridiculing the moralising tone that such clear-cut divisions once had; secondly, it renders problematic the division between children/adult or erotic/pornographic material, which is at the core of Western cultural morality, based on the supremacy of rational judgement over emotions and the body (Kipnis 1993: 136–8); third, in not being able to understand or abide by these boundaries, Heribert's masculinity comes across as even more maladaptive.

Masculine values, however, seem to be more resilient, and this leads Heribert to reassert his faith in binary oppositions: 'el que era de criatura era negar-se a acceptar que era bo que les cosses estiguessin classificades: tot i les imperfeccions de les etiquetes, aquella era l'única forma de delimitar-les, capir-les, controlar-les, copsar-les' (Monzó 1983: 30). It is not surprising that Heribert resorts to rationalization and the notion of some source of authoritative meaning when feeling doubtful, since according to Seidler the need for rationality and control is at the base of masculine values (Seidler 1989: 2). We see, then, how the pornographic element in Monzó's narrative serves as a platform from which to enact a series of different crises and thus open them up for discussion: the problem of hierarchical generic classifications in the arts and the traditional patriarchal view of sex as a symbol of manhood.

If the first part of *Benzina* presents Heribert's downfall, the second focuses on Humbert's rise. A consideration of Humbert's particular relation to sex will help introduce the second point I want to discuss with regard to the use of pornographic imagery in Monzó's narrative, namely the theme of pornographic utopia. Marcus coined the term 'pornotopia' to refer to 'that vision which regards all of human experiences as a series of exclusively sexual events or conveniences' (Marcus 1970: 216), while Kimmel uses the term 'pornographic utopia' to refer to the world of fantasy created by pornography, and its influence on those who consume it (Kimmel 2005: 91). In the

second part of the novel Humbert –now married to Helena, his agent, who used to be Heribert’s wife and agent– enjoys a phase of extreme and excessive creativity, which is presented in the narrative as going hand in hand with a phase of heightened sexual drive and activity. At some point Helena tells him that Heribert has had an affair with a woman called Hildegarda and, although this is the first time that he hears about this woman’s existence, Humbert becomes fixated with the idea of having sexual intercourse with her, and tries to arrange an encounter with her as a matter of urgency.

In the subsequent pages, the plot strongly evokes the notion of pornotopia or pornographic utopia, since Humbert experiences numerous sexual encounters, sporadic or not: he meets a woman he thinks is Hildegarda and, once in his car, without any preliminary introduction, he kisses and undresses her. In spite of her beauty, however, he loses his sexual appetite on realising that her name is in reality Alexandra, a name which, not beginning with an ‘h’, sets her apart conspicuously from the rest of the novel’s characters. He is still capable of consummating the encounter, but has to do so with his eyes closed and as quickly as he can. A couple of days later, he is finally able to meet Hildegarda: he kisses her immediately, and they decide to travel to Chicago, where he is launching a new exhibition. Humbert then plunges into a downward spiral: he has a sexual encounter with two twin sisters at a party, continues having sex with his wife and has intercourse on repeated occasions with Hildegarda during their trip. Most of the sexual descriptions in this part of the narrative are strongly influenced by erotic imagery: on one occasion, for example, Hildegarda is depicted stepping out of the shower enfolded in a towel, while Humbert ‘li treia la tovallola i la deixava caure a terra, sense accedir a esperar que s’eixugués’ (Monzó 1983: 170), thus echoing the ideal of immediacy and constant availability enacted in pornographic cinema.

The events in this part of the novel have an oneiric, and even surreal quality, as they contain strange conversations between Humbert and Hildegarda, the description of his bouts of insomnia and his obsession with work and sex. This material is interwoven with the description of numerous sexual encounters, which again are reminiscent of Scott Beattie's description of pornotopia as 'utopias of free excess or dystopic states of anomie' (Beattie 2009: 5). Marcus had already described utopias as the space 'where time as we know it and some other kind of time intersect' (Marcus 1970: 269). In the case of pornotopia, time is to be understood as sexual time: 'its real unit of measurement is an internal one –the time it takes either for a sexual act to be represented or for an autoerotic act to be completed' (Marcus 1970: 270). The passages from *Benzina* described above seem aptly to exemplify this facet of pornotopia, since Humbert engages in a relentless sexual spree, during which he is either performing sexual acts, masturbating or fantasising about it. Humbert's unremitting sexual activities can also be read as symbolic of the association between sexual potency and social/professional success embedded in dominant masculinity: if Heribert is undergoing a creative crisis that undermines his sexuality, Humbert finds himself in exactly the opposite situation.

By contrast to Heribert, Humbert knows how to keep in control during his sexual encounters with women: he always makes the first move. Heribert, by contrast, is unable to date a young admirer because he 'has forgotten how to seduce women' (Fernández 1998: 267). As Seidler puts it: 'As boys, sex is often an issue of seeing how far we can get. [...] sex as achievement replaces any notion of sex as a pleasure' (Seidler 1989: 39). Humbert's actions clearly embody Seidler's ideas: he wants to have casual sex with Hildegarda just because she had slept with Heribert. It will be the second time he has intercourse with a woman whom Heribert had previously dated. In fact, this is

the driving force behind his sexual arousal: when he follows her, ‘La mirava caminar davant d’ell. Li agradava. Se la imaginava en braços de l’Heribert, suau i càlida. Tingué una erecció’ (150). Heribert’s loss of sexual appetite when realising that he has mistaken Alexandra for Hildegarda shows that he is not having sex for pleasure, but for the sake of experiencing a sense of achievement. The whole novel can be interpreted as the story of Humbert’s replacement of Heribert, and having sex with Hildegarda is another step in this process. Despite this contrasting depiction, the circular structure of the novel also gives the impression that Humbert will eventually follow Heribert’s path and lose his artistic inspiration. However, this doubling identification of both protagonists seems to rest on the outright commodification of women: Heribert’s/Humbert’s wife and Hildegarda are both useful tools in enhancing their career success and are also something to be possessed or acquired by them as symbols of success.

The short story ‘Dos rams de roses’ also has the concept of pornographic utopia at its core. The story tells of an unusual weekend in the life of a middle-aged man, whose boss gives him permission to leave his office early on a Friday afternoon and go home. This unnamed male protagonist seems to enjoy a perfect family life: he has a lovely wife, with whom he still enjoys a more than fulfilling sexual relation, and two perfect children, who behave in an untypically mature manner. After arriving home, the family spends part of the weekend together in what seems the description of marital bliss, but by Saturday evening the husband feels the need to go out by himself. His wife, far from showing any opposition to the idea, vividly encourages him to do so. Once out, the man meets with the two young sisters who run the local florists’ and they end up sleeping together and smoking marijuana, in a pornotopian sequence where characters seem to lose the notion of time: when engaging in group sex, the protagonist describes

how ‘cada tantes hores miro el rellotge que duc al canell i les busques amb prou feines han avançat cinc minuts’ (Monzó 2001: 105), which alludes to the sense of infinite pleasure that he is experiencing. On Sunday afternoon, the protagonist returns home and is welcomed with joy by his wife and children.

The events of this unnamed man’s *perfect* weekend seem to represent the quintessential male fantasy, according to the ideals of hegemonic bourgeois masculinity: to have a quiet and fulfilling family life after being married for nine years, whilst simultaneously being able to have sexual encounters with other women and enjoy entire nights out without fear of reprisal from a partner. This can be read as the representation of absolute individual fulfilment from three different, yet interrelated, perspectives: bourgeois property, capitalist individuality and dominant masculinity. This utopia is not only centred on sex but this is certainly the pivotal element: when the main character arrives home, he reflects on his marriage saying that ‘Nou anys junts, amb dues criatures, i encara sentim el desig’ (Monzó 2001: 94). After spending the evening with their kids, they go out to a club together and dance as they used to do in their youth. Back home, they copulate and then fall asleep. Their sexual relationship is described as fiery and imaginative: they have sex again in the middle of the night, and, in the morning, she wakes him up by giving him oral pleasure. In the scene, both of them participate in sexual games, including anal explorations and sperm swapping, which adds to the narrator’s portrayal of the protagonist as an accomplished example of modern masculinity: ‘descarrego dins la boca [...]. Se m’acosta als llavis i me’n passa just la meitat, sense jo mostrar cap rebuig, com acostumen a fer alguns homes, ans al contrari’ (Monzó 2001: 98–9).

In spite of this satisfying married sex life, the main character feels the need to look for new experiences and to have sex outside marriage. While this is a clear

vindication of casual and non-relational sex, the short story seems also to transmit the idea that married sex can still be adventurous. The text suggests that the male protagonist needs *carte blanche* to seek individual pleasure and that he will only encounter obliging women on his way, thus depicting ‘a world in which we, and our partners, are always sexually satisfied. The pornographic utopia is a world of abundance, abandon and autonomy –a world, in short, utterly unlike the one we inhabit’ (Kimmel 2005: 91). In this realm, women always seem to respond to men’s advances: ‘Pornography often represents women as inviting, apparently desiring intimacy and physical closeness’ (Barker 1992: 134). It is not by chance, therefore, that ‘Dos rams de roses’ contains another threesome scene, the third mentioned in this article, which is a re-elaboration of the man-with-two-sisters structure already seen in *Benzina* (Monzó 1983: 164). These passages, which do not provide a detailed description of the group sex scenes, seem to suggest that the women engage in lesbian practices. In any case, as the patriarchal pornographic ideal dictates, the narrative focuses on two women devoted exclusively to pleasuring the male character. While the whole episode lacks descriptive detail, the reader is compelled to interpret it as a typical patriarchal sexual encounter, since the sexual group scene between a man and two women evokes the characteristically male-centred perspective of mainstream heterosexual pornography.

In addition to these pornographic fantasies, ‘Dos rams de roses’ also depicts a capitalist utopia: the main character’s materialistic volitions are invariably satisfied and everything works perfectly according to the ideal of accomplished liberal individuality. He has a family, a job, a house and a car. The middle-class married couple also owns a second residence in the coastal resort of Salou, where they spend some weekends. The male protagonist is constantly looking for pleasurable activities and is never disappointed: the water gets warm very quickly when he showers; at the night club,



which has several areas to suit everyone's musical preferences, waiters are efficient and kind; when the whole family visit the circus they find a parking space right in front of the main entrance; when they are watching TV, the programmes are both entertaining and intellectually stimulating; when he feels overwhelmed by family life and wants to go out alone, his wife encourages him to sleep overnight at their house in Salou.

Unsurprisingly, 'Dos rams de roses' interlinks the pornographic and capitalist utopia. The gender and sexuality theorist Beatriz Preciado has studied the historical alliance between both utopias in the construction of contemporary masculinity, through her analysis of how the magazine *Playboy* came to symbolize the transformation of masculine values in the second half of the twentieth century, from the traditional model of the family breadwinner to the forever-youthful man who revels in consumerism, urban life and in 'la maximización de encuentros sexuales' (2010: 62). In her study, Preciado establishes a dichotomy between the post-war American nuclear family and the 'capitalismo farmacopornográfico' promoted by *Playboy*, which counterposed sexual freedom and juvenile pleasure to the tedious monogamy of married life (2010: 52). According to Preciado, the magazine helped men escape from the confined spaces of marital domesticity by activating metaphors against traditional family life and monogamy, which is precisely what we see in the case of the protagonist of 'Dos rams de roses'. However, while Preciado points out that the model promoted by *Playboy* was 'la del joven soltero, urbanita y casero' (2010: 34), Monzó's pornotopia seems to be even more complete, since the protagonist enjoys both a satisfying family life and casual sexual encounters. In consequence, the pornographic utopia depicted in Monzó's story blends married and single life into a never-ending state of masculine pleasure.

The theme of pursuit of total pleasure is so stretched in Monzó's story that the text acquires a powerful ironic meaning: since the plot mixes real and plausible

situations with hyper-real and oneiric elements provoked by drug consumption, the whole story could be interpreted as a parody of the sexual and capitalist utopia. Accordingly, 'Dos rams de roses' can also be read as a negation of what it seems to affirm, since the description of the marital relation experienced by the protagonist causes a sense of estrangement that hints at the fallacy of the ideology of matrimonial life and middle-class domesticity. It is important to remember that the story begins with the main character bored in his office on a Friday afternoon, just before the weekend. His happiness starts when he decides to break his routine by asking for permission to leave work early, but this is only possible because the story is placed at the start of the weekend, the quintessential moment of regulated release and promise in contemporary capitalist lifestyles. This sense of harmony is slightly disturbed for the first time at the end of the short story, when the protagonist's wife is suspicious of him coming back home with a bucket of roses (she is unaware that this is a present from his two lovers). Her first doubts regarding her husband's sexual fidelity therefore coincide with the final hours of the weekend, which can be read as signalling a closure of the strongly-linked pornographic and capitalist utopia.

Hegemonic masculinity is a historically constructed set of values, and power is one of its main constituents (Beynon 2002: 16). As John MacInnes points out, terms such as 'hard, aggressive, strong, dominant, remote, powerful, fearful of intimacy, rational, unemotional, competitive, sexist and their synonyms' (MacInnes 1998: 14) still define its essence. This aggressive and dominant masculinity is paramount in Monzó's texts, which include images of male sexual violence against women. 'El regne vegetal' describes the vicissitudes of a man who rapes his girlfriend and enjoys it to the degree that in the future, he resolves, 'Només tastaria els fruits prohibits' (Monzó 2001: 124). He further tries additional sexual practices, both legal and illegal, including being an

‘exhibicionista, voyeur, pervertidor de menors, gigoló, sàdic, amant de la zoofilia, masoquista, sodomita’ (Monzó 2001: 125). This short story, in the same way as ‘Dos rams de roses’, is focalized through a first-person male narrator, which arguably has the effect of increasing readers’ identification with the narrative voice. This is achieved partly as the protagonist’s conduct seems to be excused because forbidden actions are used to mount an attack on conventional morals, as the narrator himself acknowledges: ‘terreny que m’era prohibit, terreny que prenia per assalt’ (Monzó 2001: 125). The story, therefore, relies strongly on the trivialization of male sexual violence and also on the derision of political correctness, the latter being a position that Monzó has publically rejected in numerous occasions.

The main character feels quite happy while engaging in unconventional practices, but when he meets an innocent girl in a bar who persuades him to engage in harmless and customary activities –they walk around the Born and Ramblas, drink hot chocolate and talk about banalities; he does not even try to kiss her– his attitude changes drastically: scared because he has enjoyed a non-violent relation with a woman, he returns to his former habits. Once back home, in order to feel better ‘em vaig haver de masturbar mirant fotos de bèsties (porc, gossos i ases) que penetraven bocabadades damisel·les de cabells rossos tenyits: bé havia de mantenir la integritat!’ (Monzó 2001: 127). The role of pornography consumption in this scene is to cause the protagonist to revert to his old bad ways and reassure himself that his masculine ‘integrity’ is restored. On their second meeting he reacts very violently when she rejects his sexual advances, even though he also finds some enjoyment in her refusal: ‘Aquestes adolescents d’ara, que no se’t resisteixen, et fan perdre l’al·licient per les petites coses de la vida’ (Monzó 2001: 128). When he attempts to rape her, the narrative turns, once again, into a surrealistic mode: as an excuse not to have sex with him, for instance, the girl mentions

being a convinced vegetarian, which means that she only allows herself to be penetrated by vegetables, an argument that he seemingly abides by. This grotesque element, together with the eccentricity of his comments, allows the narrative to dodge the obvious patriarchal violence and focus on the protagonist's internal struggle between a violent masculinity and the possibility of having a non-aggressive relationship with a woman.

In the end, he decides to instruct her sexually only to find himself to be more terrified by her rapid progress, which is another example of the inherent contradictions of hegemonic masculinity. In effect, Tim Edwards has established a direct link between masculine anxieties and women's empowerment, because 'the prevailing order of patriarchy is seen as being undermined by –if not necessary under threat from– the emancipation of women' (Edwards 2006: 15). 'El regne vegetal', therefore, illustrates the paradoxes of dominant masculinity in the face of recent sociological changes in interpersonal relationships: feeling restless or inadequate, men resort to sexual violence in order to reassert their masculinity, since as Kimmel notes 'violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood' (Kimmel 2005: 36).

A similar violent reaction is also found in *Benzina*, where Heribert does not know how to seduce a young admirer and considers the option of sexually abusing her: 'No sabia com actuar. ¿Havia de començar a besar-la tot d'una i, si es resistia, violar-la allà mateix? Li semblava recordar que no, que les coses no anaven ben bé així' (Monzó 1983: 66). Humbert's character also engages in a kind of imaginative rape, because he visualizes images of sexual violence that are very much influenced by pornography. While Humbert is sleeping next to Helena, for example, he starts developing an idea for a painting: 'Hi entraven dos homes per la porta i, tal com estava, bocaterrosa, la utilitzaven sexualment [...] com bèsties. No, no eren dos homes: eren tres, aprofitant tots

els orificis de l'Helena' (Monzó 1983: 130). Interestingly, right after his vision Humbert jots down in his notebook: '*Reflexionar sobre la pornografia en vídeo*' (Monzó 1983: 130, emphasis in original), in what is another example of how sexual violence appears in the intersection between pornography and hegemonic masculinity, as well as an instance of how high art and mass culture merge together in Monzó's narrative.

In the same vein as 'El regne vegetal', other short stories also centre upon the archetypal plot of the experienced male figure who shapes and instructs a young girl, which harks back to the myth of Pygmalion. Precisely, *El perquè de tot plegat* contains a literary adaptation of this myth, which Lunati has interpreted as a feminist representation of the crisis of hegemonic masculinity. According to her, this is a subversive text that 'qüestiona valors mítics que sovint han servit per escriure la veritat oficial i que són presents a les obres que Monzó parodia' (Lunati 1999). As in 'El regne vegetal', the female character in 'Pigmalió' enjoys being submissive and performing her lover's desires to perfection. Lunati further adds that the girl's discovery of her own desire places her in a powerful position, even though this also underscores her dependence on a sexual partner's expectations. Lunati also deals with the presence of pornographic images, affirming that 'tot i que Monzó explora un espai tradicionalment reservat a la pornografia, no es decanta pel voyeurisme ni per imatges que explotin els cossos dels protagonistes o la seva relació sexual' (Lunati 1999). This is a convincing interpretation of the text: although the short story is ambiguous, sexual enjoyment allows the female character to subvert the patriarchal construction of women as passive sexual beings. What Lunati does not take into account, however, is that the detailed pornographic imagery used to describe the girl's acquired sexual taste coincides with the archetypal imagery of male-centred pornography:

Ara la noia és als seus peus, amb la boca oberta i els ulls encesos. Amb una cullera, Pigmalíó recull la barreja de semen i llàgrimes que regalima per la cara de la noia i l'hi dóna a la boca, peixant-la com un bebè. Pigmalíó mira, encisat i neguitós, com la noia llepa la cullera. ¿Què més pot fer-li? (Monzó 1999: 37–8)

As we see above, the female character adopts a well-known posture in pornographic settings when he ejaculates on her face, itself an emblematic pornographic ritual. The narrative insinuates that they have performed deep-throating and describes how he spoon-feeds his own semen to the woman. Kimmel highlights the centrality and visibility of semen in pornography, and the fact that ‘male ejaculation almost invariably occurs outside the woman, and often on her’ (Kimmel 2005: 90). This practice, which focuses on the man’s orgasmic pleasure, transmits the idea that this is not fake sex, but real and visually exciting. Although this description is short, Monzó does not need to depict accurately the sexual activities of the characters, because the reader quickly recognizes the pornographic imagery, which condenses a series of clichés. Therefore Monzó’s ‘Pigmalíó’, already a highly intertextual text, relies for its full impact on the reader’s recognition of its dense pornographic imagery. The narrator’s last question – ‘Què més pot fer-li?’ – reinforces this interpretation, as it takes us back to Marcus’ point about pornography’s inherently never-ending nature.

As Lunati points out, however, the recurrent presence of irony in Monzó’s stories also needs to be taken into account (1999). Drawing on Hutcheon’s theory, she argues that Monzó’s re-writings of traditional narratives are examples of postmodern parody which both embrace and challenge the myth (Lunati 1999). It is certainly important to take into account the transgressive power of irony and the ambiguity of pornographic imagery in Monzó’s fiction, as the readings of ‘El regne vegetal’ and ‘Dos rams de roses’ have shown. However, while most analyses of Monzó’s work focus on

the subversive uses of irony, this article favours a less transgressive reading, since by virtue of their ambiguity, Monzó's ironic strategies neither confirm nor deny patriarchal values.

The practice of ejaculating on a woman's face is mentioned in another story written by Monzó, 'La mamà', which addresses the influence of pornography on young boys. The plot describes the trauma suffered by a ten-year-old boy insulted by a school friend, who calls him 'fill de puta'. Unaware of the figurative meaning of the expression, the boy takes the insult in its literal sense and starts investigating his mother's life. Eventually, he warns his dad, who, out of jealousy, believes the young boy and divorces his mother. Pornography is also present in this text: the young boy's first introduction to sex had been through pornographic magazines, where he had learned that intercourse happens mainly in beds, cars, offices and garages. He further explains his view of male ejaculation, which shows the influence of pornographic imagery on children:

al final, els homes se'ls escorren a la cara: no havia vist cap història fotogràfica on, al final, els homes s'escorreguessin en cap altre lloc que no fos la cara de les dones. Tirant lluny, s'escorrien als pits perquè no l'encertaven: això és el que pensava aleshores. Fins a tal punt n'estava convençut que creia que el final obligat de qualsevol acte sexual era que l'home s'escorregués a la cara de la dones i, si no era així, la cosa no havia anat bé. (Monzó 2001: 25)

Peter Barker has asserted that the use of pornography plays a vital role in the early stages of men's sexuality: 'Men usually first see pornography when they are quite young: it is clandestinely circulated on the way home from school or, increasingly, watched on parent's videocassette players' (Barker 1992: 125). Nowadays, as a result of

the Internet, the exposure of young people to porn has greatly increased. The story 'La mamà' highlights both the centrality of pornographic material in adolescents' sexual education and the defining role that the visual representation of semen plays in this genre: the boy suspects that his neighbour ejaculates on his mother's face, and this leads him to 'començar a sentir una mena de fàstic cada cop que tornava de l'escola i la mamà m'acostava la cara per fer-me un petó' (Monzó 2001: 25–6), to the point that he finally rejects any physical contact with his mother's face.

Monzó's insertion of pornography in 'La mamà' reflects contemporary debates about the relation between representation and reality, since, for the young boy, the representation of sex takes precedence over the real. In their award-winning essay on pornography, Andrés Barba and Javier Montes claim that pornography does not have a subversive power, since it tends to reaffirm the social order (Barba and Montes 2007: 73). In this they coincide with the feminist writer Angela Carter, who stated that most of pornography serves 'to reinforce the prevailing system of values and ideas' (Carter 1984: 18). Nevertheless, Barba and Montes are also of the opinion that, taken as a form of representation, pornography can also hold a transgressive value: 'El porno se sitúa al margen de la esfera pública, un espacio que transgrede la norma que rige el espacio común y las imágenes que resultan aceptables en él. En tanto que representación, el porno es siempre transgresor' (Barba and Montes 2007: 63). Accordingly, these critics establish a difference between the formal aspects of pornography –the type of pornography that is produced and consumed– and the social influence of the genre as a representation, tragically represented in Monzó's short story 'La mamà' by the distancing relation between the child and his mother. The presence of pornography also stages the conflict between aesthetics and politics in art: even though the role of pornography in Monzó's oeuvre is ambivalent, in several public statements he has tried



to reduce pornography to an aesthetic practice, thus rejecting the importance of the power relations upon which it rests. When asked about ‘¿Qué gracia tiene la pornografía?’, he replied that ‘Hostia, que es bella. Es bella y es excitante. [...] Porque es bello, porque ver a la gente tocándose es bello’ (González 2012). Monzó has also compared pornography to art, describing some of Poussin’s and Picasso’s paintings as pornographic: ‘Una buena película porno es tan bella y respetable como un poussin o un picasso pornos’ (González 2012). For Monzó, therefore, pornography is not only a product of mass culture but also an artistic manifestation, thus taking a clear stance in a central debate about the genre and further playing up his provocative public persona.

To conclude, this article has demonstrated that many of Monzó’s short stories are mediated by pornography and problematize its role and influence on society. Kimmel underlines the importance of examining the role of pornography in men’s sexuality because “although most pornographic images are of women, pornography is, at its heart, about men. It is about men’s relationships with sexuality, with women, and with each other” (Kimmel 2005: 67). Monzó’s texts certainly place the emphasis on the relation between pornography and men: the interactions between pornographic material and literary narrative used to explore the dark angles of masculinity do not say much about female characters, who are rather flat in comparison to male protagonists. Monzó’s models of masculinity are almost invariably inadequate, anxious as they are about their own status in relation to women. Their fear of inadequacy drives men to exert sexual violence on women as a way of experiencing power and relief. Yet, they find themselves trapped in a vicious circle between their need to redefine masculine identity and their inability to do so. This is the reason why Monzó’s men embody hegemonic masculinity in action and in crisis.

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